BD face deadline over refusal to play World Cup games in India

NEW DELHI: The International Cricket Council (ICC) has told Bangladesh to agree to play their matches at next month's T20 World Cup in India or risk being kicked out of the tournament, reports said Monday.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is refusing to play in India, citing security concerns, and have asked the ICC to shift their matches to co-hosts Sri Lanka.

The BCB held talks in Dhaka at the weekend with ICC officials over the impasse, but no agreement was reached.

"During the discussions, the BCB reiterated its formal request to the ICC to relocate Bangladesh's matches to Sri Lanka," a BCB statement said.

The ICC have not officially commented, but website ESPNCricinfo and other Indian media reported on Monday that the deadline of Wednesday had been set for Dhaka to make a decision.

According to ICC sources, Bangladesh could be replaced by Scotland, who are the highest-ranked team who did not qualify for the World Cup.

The T20 World Cup begins on February 7 with Bangladesh in England's Group 'C' and scheduled to play all of their group matches in Kolkata and Mumbai.

One suggestion was for Bangladesh to swap with Group 'B' side Ireland, whose matches are in Sri Lanka.

"Among other points, the possibility of moving Bangladesh to a different group as a means of facilitating the matter with minimum logistical adjustments was discussed," said the BCB.

While the BCB considers it unsafe for its players to travel to India, ICC's risk assessment report does not flag any specific or direct threat to the team if it participates in the tournament.

Pakistan will play all their matches in Colombo under an ICC agreement with India to play at neutral venues in global or regional tournaments.

The row erupted on January 3, when the IPL's Kolkata Knight Riders were ordered by India's cricket board to drop Bangladesh fast bowler Mustafizur Rahman, sparking fury in Dhaka.

Political relations between India and Bangladesh soured after a mass uprising in Dhaka in 2024 toppled then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina, a close ally of New Delhi.

India's foreign ministry last month condemned what it called "unremitting hostility against minorities" in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's interim leader, Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammad Yunus, has accused India of exaggerating the scale of the violence.

PAKISTAN TO JOIN HANDS?

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is reported to be weighing its options to show solidarity with the BCB's decision not to play its T20 World Cup matches in India.

Sections of the electronic media in the country have suggested that Pakistan could also consider a boycott of the tournament in support of Bangladesh, though no PCB official has so far been willing to comment on such reports.

According to these reports, the PCB has asked its team management to pause preparations for the World Cup and examine various options, including the possibility of pulling out of the event if the ICC rejects the BCB's demand.

However, it may not be easy for the PCB to withdraw after having already confirmed its participation in the ICC tournament.

Under ICC regulations, a member board that refuses to play after committing to an event can face severe financial and sporting consequences, including a fine that could run up to $2 million.

While the BCB could argue its case on the basis of security concerns, the PCB does not appear to have similarly strong grounds for a boycott. There are also reports that the PCB has made no serious effort to contact other boards to build collective support for Bangladesh's position, which might have strengthened Dhaka's case.

According to the ICC's Member Participation Agreement, specific provisions apply in cases of withdrawal. These include the imposition of heavy financial penalties, forfeiture of matches and points, loss of revenue share from the tournament, and the possibility of the withdrawing team being replaced by another country based on rankings.

In addition, the ICC may initiate disciplinary proceedings for bringing the game into disrepute or breaching contractual obligations.—Agencies

PSL adopts auction model for player aquisition from next season

By Our Sports Reporter

LAHORE: The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) on Monday announced sweeping changes to the player acquisition mechanism for the 11th edition of the Pakistan Super League, replacing the long-running draft with a full-fledged auction and raising the player purse to $1.6 million per franchise in a move aimed at restoring competitive balance in an expanded eight-team tournament.

The decision follows the induction of two new franchises, Sialkot and Hyderabad, earlier this month, a development that had sparked concerns among the new owners about an uneven playing field because the existing six teams enjoyed extensive retention rights.

With no players to retain, the newcomers had argued they would be at a clear disadvantage unless the system was overhauled.

Under the new framework, each franchise will be allowed to retain a maximum of four players, with no more than one from each category.

The concepts of mentors, brand ambassadors and the right-to-match (RTM) option have been scrapped altogether. Previously, teams could retain up to eight players — and effectively a ninth through RTM — giving established sides a significant head start.

In a press release, the PCB said the shift to an auction after a decade of the draft system was intended to "enhance competitive balance, increase transparency and provide players greater earning opportunities".

All released players will form a common pool for the auction. The two new teams will be permitted to pick and retain up to four players from this pool before the auction, subject to mutual agreement between player and franchise.

Any such signings will be treated as retentions and their salaries will be deducted from the team's overall purse, a mechanism similar to the one used when Multan Sultans joined the league in its third season.

A clarification issued after the announcement said there would be no carry-over of last year's categories, with fresh categories to be determined and announced by the PSL, and teams having no say in the categorisation of local players.

Each franchise will also be allowed one direct signing of a foreign player who did not feature in the previous season, giving teams an additional avenue to bolster their squads with new international talent.

The PCB also confirmed that the salary cap has been increased from $1.4m to $1.6m per team, a move it said underlined the league's commitment to rewarding performance and attracting elite domestic and overseas cricketers.

"These progressive measures reflect the league's strategic trajectory and evolution, while remaining firmly rooted in its mission to promote cricketing excellence and fan engagement," the board said.

PSL 11 will begin on March 26, and will also mark the return of Faisalabad as a host city, expanding the league's footprint beyond the existing venues of Karachi, Lahore, Multan and Rawalpindi.

Further details of the auction process and schedule are to be announced in due course.

MELBOURNE: Emma Navarro of the US in action during her Australian Open first-round match against Poland's Magda Linette at Melbourne Park on Monday.—Reuters

Centurion Djokovic romps to Melbourne win as Swiatek, Gauff move on

MELBOURNE: Novak Djokovic began his latest bid for a record 25th Grand Slam crown with an emphatic straight-sets victory on Monday as fellow Australian Open title contenders Iga Swiatek and Coco Gauff also won but with less sparkle.

Three-time finalist Daniil Medvedev stayed alive, as did 40-year-old Stan Wawrinka, who rolled back the clock to reach the second round in his tournament farewell.

Serbian great Djokovic, 38, tamed Spain's 71st-ranked Pedro Martinez 6-3, 6-2, 6-2 on Rod Laver Arena, a court where he has won a record 10 Australian Open crowns.

The world number four owns 24 major titles, equal for the most ever with Australia's Margaret Court, but a 25th has remained agonisingly out of reach.

His last came at the 2023 US Open with Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz sharing all eight since then.

"What can I say? I like the sound of it. Centurion is pretty nice," he said after his 100th victory at the Australian Open.

"I always give my best whenever I'm on the court. Obviously, history-making is a great motivation, and particularly in the last 5-10 years of my career."

The 2014 champion Wawrinka lived to fight another day with a gutsy four-set victory.

The three-time major winner is playing his last season before retiring and gave his all to down Serbia's Laslo Djere 5-7, 6-3, 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) in front of a crowd willing him to victory.

"The passion is still intact. But I'm not young any more, so I need to be careful also," said the Swiss warhorse, who made his Australian Open debut in 2006.

Medvedev, runner-up in 2021, 2022 and 2024, warmed up for Melbourne with victory in Brisbane and ground to a 7-5, 6-2, 7-6 (7/2) opening round win over Dutchman Jesper de Jong.

The famously feisty Russian said he was trying to be more "positive" on court.

"So far I'm doing it well," he said.

Sixth seed Alex de Minaur, the big home hope, was also a straight-sets winner on another hot day where temperatures reached about 30C and record crowds of more than 100,000 faced long queues to get into Melbourne Park.

The tournament is over, however, for seventh seed Felix Auger-Aliassime, who retired from his match with cramp.

Auger-Aliassime won the opening set 6-3 against Nuno Borges but then lost the next two before calling time.

"I want to be on the court competing with my opponent. I don't want to be just standing there like a punching bag," he said.

Originally drawn to play injured former Wimbledon finalist Matteo Berrettini, sixth-seeded Australian De Minaur instead faced lucky loser Mackenzie McDonald and thrashed the American 6-2, 6-3, 6-3.

Frenchman Alexandre Muller later denied fans more local success to cheer when he outlasted Alexei Popyrin in the sort of marathon five-setter that turns John Cain Arena into a bear pit in the early rounds at Melbourne Park

In the women's draw, six-time major winner Swiatek was made to work unexpectedly hard against Chinese qualifier Yuan Yue.

The Polish second seed, who will complete a career Grand Slam of all four majors if she breaks her Australian Open duck, eventually saw off her spirited opponent 7-6 (7/5), 6-3.

"I was a bit rusty at the beginning," said Swiatek. "For sure many ups and downs, but overall I have some stuff to work on."

Gauff beat Uzbekistan's Kamilla Rakhimova 6-2, 6-3, but was also less than convincing at the start and struggled with her serve.

"I am only satisfied if I win, but I am proud of myself regardless of how I get on," she said.

Her reward is a clash next with Venus Williams' conqueror Olga Danilovic.

Like Swiatek, Gauff has yet to go past the last four in Melbourne.

Gauff's fellow American, fourth seed Amanda Anisimova, began her quest for a third consecutive major final with a ruthless win over Switzerland's Simona Waltert, 6-3, 6-2.

Sixth seed Jessica Pegula and eighth seed Mirra Andreeva also progressed.

However, former champion Sofia Kenin crashed out and so did Alexandra Eala despite manic support from Philippines fans.

The 20-year-old Eala was in the main draw for the first time and even practice sessions were mobbed by large numbers of her compatriots.

"I think this week definitely there were elements that were a bit overwhelming," she said of the support following a three-set loss to Alycia Parks.

Canada's Marina Stakusic was taken off in a wheelchair when she cramped up against home player Priscilla Hon.—Agencies

Australia rest Cummins, Hazlewood and Maxwell for Pakistan T20 series

MELBOURNE: Australia will rest five senior players, including Pat Cummins, Josh Hazlewood and Glenn Maxwell, for the three-match Twenty20 series against Pakistan in Lahore later this month as selectors manage workloads and injuries ahead of the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka.

Hard-hitting batter Tim David and fast bowler Nathan Ellis will also miss the series, which begins on Jan 29, with matches on Jan 31 and Feb 1. The tournament proper runs from Feb 7 to March 8.

Chief selector George Bailey said the decision was taken to ensure the players were fully fit for the World Cup.

Cummins, who is recovering from a lower back injury, returned during the third Ashes Test in Adelaide but missed the final two matches against England and will also sit out the Pakistan series.

Hazlewood has been nursing hamstring and Achilles problems, while David has been recovering from a hamstring strain and suffered a minor setback last week. Bailey said both were expected to be fit in time for the World Cup.

"Pat's a little bit different. He'll probably join that World Cup group a little bit later in the tournament, around game three or four," Bailey said, adding that the others were either returning from injury or having their loads managed.

The absences have opened the door for several fringe and younger players, with fast bowler Mahli Beardman and all-rounder Jack Edwards in line to make their international debuts after being named in a 17-man squad.

After the Pakistan series, Australia will travel to Sri Lanka, where they open their World Cup campaign against Ireland in Colombo on Feb 11.

Australia squad: Mitchell Marsh (captain), Sean Abbott, Xavier Bartlett, Mahli Beardman, Cooper Connolly, Ben Dwarshuis, Jack Edwards, Cameron Green, Travis Head, Josh Inglis, Matthew Kuhnemann, Mitch Owen, Josh Philippe, Matthew Renshaw, Matthew Short, Marcus Stoinis and Adam Zampa.—Agencies

Ali Raza stars as Pakistan register first victory in U-19 World Cup

PAKISTAN'S Ahmed Hussain takes a catch to dismiss Scotland's Manu Saraswat during their U-19 World Cup match at the Takashinga Sports Club on Monday.—Courtesy ICC

HARARE: Pacer Ali Raza starred as Pakistan beat Scotland by six wickets to get off the mark at the U-19 World Cup at the Takashinga Sports Club in Harare on Monday.

Ali took four wickets to help Pakistan bowl Scotland out for a paltry 187 before a match-defining century stand between Usman Khan and Ahmed Hussain took the side over the line.

Pakistan opted to bowl upon winning the toss and Ali Raza instantly justified the decision, clean bowling Theo Robinson and Max Chaplin in the first over with full and straight deliveries.

Captain Thomas Knight dug in for his 37 but when he was bowled by Momin Qamar (3-46), Scotland were 115 for six.

Finlay Jones (33) and Manu Saraswat (25) compiled a valiant seventh-wicket stand of 58 but there was little resistance thereafter as Scotland were bowled out with 11 balls unused.

In reply, Ollie Jones (2-41) removed both Pakistan openers in quick succession to leave the chasing side 48 for two.

Usman and Ahmed then combined for 111 to settle any nerves. Usman made 75 from 85 balls and Ahmed, who had earlier taken a brilliant diving catch in the deep to remove Saraswat, contributed a patient 47 from 92.

Both fell before the job was done but captain Farhan Yousaf (18 not out) saw his side take the game with 6.5 overs to spare.

In other matches, South Africa rode on centuries by Mohammad Bulbulia and Jason Rowles to thrash Tanzania by 329 runs in Windhoek, while Sri Lanka cruised past Ireland by 106 runs thanks to captain Vimath Dinsara's 95.—Agencies

NONTHABURI (Thailand): Pakistan's Anmol Hira competes during the SAFF Women's Futsal Championship match against India at the Nonthaburi Stadium on Monday. Hira scored Pakistan's third goal — adding to strikes by captain Kayanat Bokhari and Azwa Chahudhry — to put her side 3-1 up, only for India to score four times with Diti Kamlesh Kanugo bagging a brace to secure a 5-3 win. Victory in the match, which saw both sets of players shake hands, saw India go top of the standings with nine points from four matches. Bangladesh, who have played three matches, occupy second place with seven points and are ahead of third-placed Pakistan, who suffered their first defeat at the tournament, on goal difference. —Courtesy SAFF

Pakistan to meet Ivory Coast, two lowly-ranked nations in FIFA series

KARACHI: Pakistan women's football team will come up against African sides Ivory Coast Mauritania as well as the Turks and Caicos Islands from the Caribbean during their inaugural participation in the FIFA Series this year, world's football governing body said on Monday.

Pakistan did not participate in the first edition of the FIFA Series, sponsored biennial tournaments for mainly lower-ranked and lesser-financed nations, which was limited to men's teams but the Pakistan Football Federation ensured that the women's side became one of 12 teams that will play across three host countries during the inaugural women's edition.

Ranked 154th in the world, Pakistan's biggest test at the FIFA Series — which is aimed at benefitting national teams lacking opportunities to play sides from other continents with FIFA contributing to travel costs, accommodation and other logistics — is likely to come against hosts Ivory Coast.

The Ivorians were 72nd in the FIFA rankings that were updated in December. Mauritania, who played their debut international match in 2019, are yet to feature in the women's rankings while the Turks and Caicos are 196th.

The national team was last in action during the AFC Women's Asian Cup qualifiers where they won two of their three matches, against hosts Indonesia and Kyrgyzstan. Last month, the PFF advertised the post of head coach for the women's team.

In all 48 teams are taking part this year, including five that qualified for the 2026 World Cup. FIFA had announced in November that the tournaments with friendly matches was expanding in 2026, with 11 host countries in all.

Australia, Cape Verde, Curacao, New Zealand and Uzbekistan — all of whom qualified for the 2026 men's World Cup — will take part this year during the international match window in March and April.

Though some games in the first 24-nation series in 2024 were sparsely attended, others did spark big fan interest, with more than 85,000 turning up for Egypt's tournament finale against Croatia in Cairo which they lost 4-2.—Agencies